

NEWS RELEASE



U. S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Southern Region

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USDA FOREST SERVICE SOUTHERN REGION CONTINUES CAVE AND MINE CLOSURE ORDER TO PROTECT BATS IN SOUTHERN REGION

ATLANTA (May 22, 2012) - In response to the continued spread of white-nose syndrome affecting bat species, the USDA Forest Service Southern Region is renewing its closure order on all caves and abandoned mines on national forests in the Southern Region.

Under the closure order, which becomes effective on May 21, 2012 all caves and abandoned mines on national forests and units in 13 Southern states from Oklahoma to Virginia and Florida will remain closed unless posted open. All uses would be prohibited except organized rescue efforts and other actions specifically authorized by the agency.

More than 5.5 million bats have died as a result of white-nose syndrome in the eastern United States and Canada, including almost 25,000 endangered Indiana bats.

White-nose syndrome is named for a white fungus that appears on the faces, ears, wings and feet of hibernating bats. The disease causes bats to come out of hibernation severely underweight, often starving before the insects-on which they feed-emerge in the spring. Once a colony is infected, it spreads rapidly and has the possibility of killing over 90 percent of bats within the cave in just two years.

Scientists know the fungus is spread bat-to-bat as they cluster in caves and mines, and there is the potential that it can be unknowingly transferred from one cave/mine to another on the footwear and gear of humans. Infected caves and mines may not show obvious signs of its evidence.

Education, decontamination of caving gear, and cave closures appear to have slowed the southern and western spread of WNS. The winter of 2010 – 2011 was the first winter since the discovery of WNS where there were no long-distance jumps in the distribution of WNS. While additional states and provinces were confirmed with WNS, this was expected and is within the normal dispersal distance of bats, which can spread WNS. There have been no reported human illnesses attributed to the fungus.

“White-nose syndrome has already affected caves in Virginia on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests,” said Dennis Krusac, Forest Service endangered species biologist for the Southern Region. “Staying out of caves and mines is the one thing we can do right now to slow the further spread of the fungus. We will enforce this closure order in hopes of protecting some of the largest bat populations in the United States.”

Many national forests in the Southern Region are home to several species of bats, included the federally endangered Indiana bat, Virginia big-eared bat, gray bat and Ozark big-eared bats. Bats are a natural and important part of the forests, making a significant contribution towards the control of forest and agricultural insects and pests.

The Southern Region encompasses 13 states and Puerto Rico. For more information about the Southern Region visit www.fs.fed.us/r8.

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